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Published online: 24 Feb 2020.

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Digital gaming culture in Vietnam: an exploratory study

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ABSTRACT

New information and communication technologies continue to spread rapidly into the Asian marketplace, which has led to new patterns of leisure consumption, one of the most popular being digital gaming. However, in Vietnam there is limited research on gaming as a leisure activity. The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of digital gaming in Vietnam to better understand how it is practiced in this culture. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-five gaming industry figures and gamers. Thematic analysis was used to guide data collection and analysis. The findings indicate that glocalisation, socialised gaming practices and competitiveness characterise the Vietnamese gaming experience. The distinct culture of Vietnam combined with globalised gaming consumption habits has created new modes of play culture, and hence leisure experiences that are growing in pervasive and influential ways.

In discussing modern leisure, it is important to understand the central role of digital cultures and practices in terms of how these are being increasingly interwoven into everyday leisure pursuits (Silk, Millington, Rich, & Bush, 2016). Digital gaming is one of an array of new information and communication technologies that has spread rapidly world-wide and adopted by many as a leisure activity (Boudreau & Consalvo, 2014) to the extent that digital gaming as a leisure pursuit has moved beyond the simple targeting of age and gender (Millington, 2016). The almost ubiquitous rise of smartphone use has ensured that games can be accessed constantly (McCauley, Merola, & Gumbley, 2017) and devices increasingly influence everyday life experiences, structures and forms, re-enforcing the need to further conceptualise leisure as being a part of the digital world (Silk et al., 2016).

Gaming has become the world's largest entertainment industry, which continues to grow in size with 2.3 billion gamers worldwide, spending $137.9USD billion on games in 2018 (Wijman, 2018). Competitive video gaming (eSports) is also rising as an important element of the global gaming market, continuing to grow in numbers and revenues (Scholz, 2019). Asia is currently the fastest growing region in the global games market industry so it's important to understand the ways that gaming as a new media, drive new kinds of social interaction and engagement in this region (Fung & Ho, 2015). Understanding gaming within this context allows us to investigate how it is experienced as a popular leisure activity for players as well as its networks of production, circulation and consumption (Hjorth & Chan, 2009). The role of digitality in leisure raises important questions about how it is shaped within geographical, familial, socio-economic and cultural contexts (Silk et al., 2016).

Vietnam is a vibrant, emerging economy of over 90 million people, 50% of whom are aged under 30 years, a significant number of whom engage in digital games (CIA, 2018). Since the institution of *Đổi Mới* (economic reforms) in 1986, Vietnam has transformed from one of the world's poorest nations to a lower middle-income country with GDP growth per capita among the fastest in the world (Worldbank, 2017). This has led to a growth in disposal incomes and time available for participation in new and emerging leisure activities (Earl, 2004; Nguyen, Özçaglar-Toulouse, & Kjeldgaard, 2018).

Vietnam continues to develop digitally with forty percent of the country regularly accessing social media, ranking seventh among the countries with the most Facebook users (Statista, 2018). More than one third of the country's population can be considered gamers and its video game revenue is ranked 28th in the world (Newzoo, 2017), with a reported seventy percent of the population now having access to the internet (InternetWorldStats, 2019). To date little is known about gaming as a leisure activity in the country (McCauley, Nguyen, & McDonald, 2016), yet like other countries around the world, it has become a pervasive leisure activity engaged in by people from all strata of society (Silk et al., 2016).

The frame of reference used to conduct this exploratory study is Shaw's (2010) argument that digital gaming be investigated as part of a wider cultural discourse as opposed to games as a subculture. In addition, studies of online behaviours such as gaming should also acknowledge the offline culture in which it is embedded (Beltagui & Schmidt, 2017; Shaw, 2010). As a result, gaming as a leisure activity needs to be examined within the cultural and social norms of Vietnamese society.

The analysis presented is based on interviews with gaming industry figures and gamers to provide an overview of Vietnamese gaming practices and culture. Our examination of the literature demonstrates that little if anything is known about Vietnamese gamers. Studies tend to ignore emerging Asian nations in favour of the larger and more established developed countries in the region such as China, Korea, Japan and Taiwan (So, 2010). The current study seeks to address this issue by conducting an exploratory analysis of Vietnamese gaming culture and leisure.

Conducting this study through multiple lines of disciplinary and theoretical inquiry allows us to identify some of the multifaceted processes that may not otherwise be immediately clear when observing this leisure activity (Boudreau & Consalvo, 2014). In developing the parameters for this inquiry, two overarching research questions were posed.

(1) What are the distinct cultural practices that inform gaming as a leisure activity in Vietnam?
(2) How does Vietnamese culture inform modes of digital gaming?

Gaming & Culture

Leisure in the world of digitalisation has become rapidly prevalent in daily life (Fox & Lepine, 2012), however, defining digital game culture is problematic. Viewing it solely as a *subculture* fails to acknowledge the broader context in which the activity and associated experiences are engaged in (Shaw, 2010). The way in which digital technologies such as games, smartphones and the Internet are used tend to reflect the cultures of those who use them, and these facilitate the ludification of culture (Raessens, 2006). Previously, it was considered that gaming was a male dominated activity that took place in cultural niches, and early gaming culture was often vilified by the traditional media (Williams, 2003). Gaming has generally been conceived of as a casual leisure activity, however, it has increasingly moved towards the characteristics of serious leisure, which include perseverance, leisure career, knowledge and skills, durable benefits, unique ethos and identities (Stebbins, 1992). Each of these characteristics has become relevant to the evolution of gaming and the rise of eSports, this distinction being dependent on the choice or type of game (Kooiman & Sheehan, 2015). Further, gaming evolved beyond initial demographic consumption, so that it is now popular with young women (McLean & Griffiths, 2013) and families (Chambers, 2012). Yuen and

Johnson (2017) have observed that online digital spaces can be conceived of as third places – places beyond home and work – that have the potential to enhance social interactions, as opposed to contributing to the isolation of individuals. Games also function as both culture and cultural objects providing a window into how different social structures influence individual and communal behaviour online (Steinkuehler, 2006). Thus, gaming and the broader activities surrounding it are becoming an increasingly mainstream and complex phenomenon.

Game culture has often been defined via descriptions of gamers and so it is important to move away from these typologies as they have the potential to reinforce gamer stereotypes (Shaw, 2010). Early research tended to concentrate on individual digital gameplay in isolation (Boudreau & Consalvo, 2014) ignoring broader contextual factors. To avoid this, in-depth qualitative accounts of gamers and gaming cultures have been called for to understand the production, consumption and experience of digital games within their cultural context (Shaw, 2010). Gaming can function to enact the social norms, values and attitudes of particular cultures (Toscano, 2011). Therefore, investigating games and games culture can help us to understand the impact of globalisation on leisure (Steinkuehler, 2006) and more specifically how digital platforms have shifted leisure practices, cultures and experiences (Silk et al., 2016).

Vietnam

Despite an intensification of Western influences, China, Korea, Japan and other East Asian countries, have become the most significant influence on Vietnamese popular culture and new media (Ching, 2015; Nguyen, 2016). Historically, China had sovereign rule over large areas of Vietnam for over 2000 years (Kang, 2010; Murray, 2016). Confucian values such as respect for social hierarchy, order, maintaining social harmony, a sense of decorum and a regard for sincerity, courage, and perseverance, continue to play a significant role in the Vietnamese value system (Murray, 2016; Nguyen, McDonald, Ha Thanh Nguyen, & McCauley, 2020). As collectivism is an orientating principle in Confucianism and communism, the Vietnamese maintain intimate ties with family often sacrificing their own needs for the good to the group (Nguyen, 2016; Truong, Hallinger, & Sanga, 2017). As such, the Vietnamese typically view themselves as being interdependent with others, defining themselves to a large degree by the groups they belong to (e.g. extended family, work organisation, nation), functioning as a part of a larger whole (Marr, 2000; Nguyễn & Trần, 2014). Confucian collectivist cultures place an emphasis on social harmony by maintaining good relations with others through interactions and communications. In contrast, individualistic cultures celebrate self-sufficiency, independence, egalitarianism, the satisfaction of personal needs and see conflict as both productive and destructive (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Vietnam's autocratic rule and the influence of Confucian ethics on its institutions (e.g. education, legal, media, governmental agencies) would classify it is a *tight culture* (Gelfand et al., 2011). Tight cultures are characterised by a greater expectation that social norms are tightly controlled, and that people exercise greater levels of self-regulation. These constraints on conduct are exerted across everyday local situations that people inhabit, such as inside the home and family, classroom, workplace, public parks and restaurants (Gelfand et al., 2011).

Confucianism still plays in an important role in Vietnamese culture, although Communist ideology and globalising values (such as freedom, individualism and materialism) are increasingly influencing people's values, beliefs and attitudes (Nguyen, 2016; Nguyen, McDonald et al., 2020; Nguyen, Özçaglar-Toulouse et al., 2018). The Vietnamese retain a distinct and unique cultural identity despite 2000 years of Chinese influence (Ralston, Terpstra-Tong, Maignan, & Napier, 2006). For example, Buddhist values such as compassion, flexibility, equality and the need to resist abuses of power play an important role in modern Vietnamese society (Murray, 2016; Siu & Chan, 2015). In terms of gaming, the influence of YouTube, Google's Play Store and Facebook have become a critical part of the Vietnamese digital gaming ecosystem providing a new set of influences not accessible to Chinese gamers.

Thus, like Vietnamese culture itself we consider Vietnamese gaming culture as distinct in its practices, developments and modes of gaming. We try to situate our findings in both cultural definitions relevant to Vietnam but also to the literature pertinent to gaming in the region (Fung & Ho, 2015). Previous studies have identified differences between Vietnamese and English-speaking mobile gamers. For example, the Vietnamese focus on game aesthetics as a motivation to play, much more than their western counterparts (McCauley, Merola et al., 2017; McCauley, Nguyen et al., 2016). The current study seeks to identify and explore these particular elements that define and characterise Vietnamese gaming culture.

Method: Thematic Analysis

Introduction

A qualitative approach in the form of *thematic analysis* was chosen for this study to guide the collection and analysis of the data (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015). This is a widely used method in the social sciences and has been previously applied in gaming research (see McLean & Griffiths, 2013). Thematic analysis rejects the 'possibility of discovering universal meaning, because meaning is understood as always being tied to the context in which it is produced' (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 223). This is aligned with the research questions set out for this study, which seek to investigate digital gaming within the Vietnamese context. Thematic analysis is a *method* as opposed to a *methodology*; the latter being underpinned by particular theoretical frameworks such interpretative phenomenological analysis (phenomenology) and grounded theory (interactionism). It provides a flexible approach, which is appropriate for this study where the focus is on exploration in terms of the topic and theoretical frameworks.

Participants & Data Collection

Participants were drawn from different parts of the gaming industry as well as gamers themselves. This included CEO's of gaming studios, game developers, digital artists, cybercafe management and gamers that frequent cybercafes. All of the participants were Vietnamese born except for two who came from Canada and France. Participant selection was guided by Shaw (2010) who argues there is a need to talk to people who both play and design/produce digital games for the market, and to inquire into how they define digital game culture in their particular context.

In all, twenty-five participants were interviewed for this study. All of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Ho Chi Minh City so as to develop greater rapport with each of the participants. The interviews took an average of 60 minutes. Purposeful sampling was used to choose participants to ensure that each could fully articulate on the research questions (Creswell, 2017). Each had a number of years' experience, either working in the games industry or as gamers. A sample size of twenty-five was deemed appropriate to capture an adequate amount of data from each aspect of the gaming industry as well as from its consumers (gamers), which is in line with Clarke et al. (2015). Among the participants, 11 were game developers and game artists, 5 were representatives in Cybercafes, which included sales managers and owners, and the remaining 9 were gamers. Participants were aged between 21–39 years, with 19 males and 6 females.

Interviews were guided by Whiting's (2008) semi-structured interview protocols following a predetermined set of questions, organised around a set of topics relating to Vietnamese gaming practices and culture, with further questions and issues emerging from the dialogue. This included modes of play, cyber cafe culture, the emergence of eSport, consumption of gaming through viewing of videos, social network gaming communities and Vietnamese societal attitudes towards gaming. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and then transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis involved five main phases (Clarke et al., 2015). Phase 1 involved an immersion in the data (*familiarisation*); reading it in a curious and questioning way. For example, trying to understand some of the basic assumptions, perceptions and worldviews that the participants account's implied or relied on. Phase 2, *coding*, involved a line by line reading of the transcripts and attaching a pithy labels (code) to each in relation to the research questions. Phase 3 *searching for themes*, represented the transition from coding to theme development. The aim of this phase was to begin aggregating similar codes together to create a plausible and coherent thematic mapping of the data. Phase 4 *reviewing themes* is designed to ensure the coded data is adequately represented in the themes. Each of the individual themes were checked to make sure 'they work in relation to the coded data' (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 238). Phase 5, *defining and naming themes*, involved elaborating on each of the themes by providing a definition and description for each. Figure 1 below outlines the data structure including the coding (column 1), the searching for the themes (column 2) and the reviewing and defining of the final themes (column 3).

Results and Discussion

Three main themes related to gaming culture, and experiences of gaming, by Vietnamese gamers emerged from the interviews with the participants. These are presented in Table 1, which outlines the theme, its indicators (words and phrases taken from the interview transcriptions) and a definition and description of each.

Glocalisation

Vietnamese gaming culture can be described as a rapidly developing phenomenon that reflects similar characteristics to those in other parts of the world, while incorporating unique aspects, practices and trends that reflect the continuing cultural and economic development of the country. While consoles such as PlayStation or Xbox consume a large part of the Western gaming environment, the Vietnamese tend to eschew this form of practice, while absorbing themselves in others.
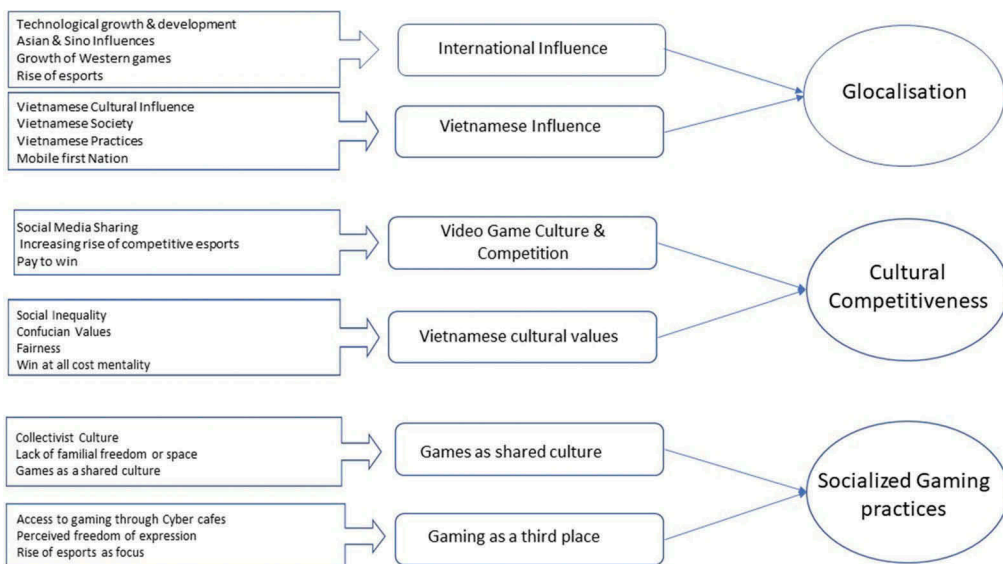

Figure 1. Data Structure.

Table 1. Digital gaming themes (in Vietnam).

1. Theme	2. Indicators	3. Definition & Description of Theme
Glocalisation Vietnamese culture Online play Esports Western Games Sino Influence Changing Practices	The rise of e-sports, increasing popularity of global games, evolution of play practices through global exposure, Asian gaming heritage, growing western influence, globalisation influences.	This theme describes the shift in Vietnamese gaming culture from a focus on localised Chinese imports to an incorporation of games represented by players globally, creating a distinct hybridised cultural space for game consumption that continues to shift and evolve. This theme represents the most overarching finding as the subsequent two themes are embedded within the combination of global and local influence.
Cultural Competitiveness Fairness Win at all costs Pay to Win Social Structures Cultural Values	Combative gaming mentality, increasing popularity of e-sports, Social media sharing, Pay-to-win practices, Unethical play practices, socioeconomic disparities.	This theme describes how Vietnamese gamers love to compete and have a win at all cost mentality in digital gaming through both play practices and demonstration of success that is rooted in traditional cultural values and driven by current societal structures and inequalities.
Socialised Gaming Practices Online Freedom Accessibility Third Place Social Spaces	Social media sharing and viewing, Viet cybercafé culture, the popularity of multiplayer games, perceived online freedom, lack of home PCs or consoles, gaming as a third place.	This theme describes the varied social practices of gaming that are distinct due to the collectivist and 'tight' culture of Vietnam, the socio-economic status of participants, and its position as a developing nation with a myriad of influences.

For example, PC and mobile games dominate gaming in Vietnam due to the early proliferation of cyber cafes as the only access to gaming available at the time until the explosion of affordable smartphones came onto the market in more recent years. This resulted in outcomes that are not typically observed in more developed economies. Participant #5, an accountant and enthusiastic gamer commented that:

> PC games are popular because if there is no PC at home, people can still play these games in Cybercafes. Gaming online is really popular nowadays, thus PC is the best platform to play. Second, mobile game is preferable because of its diversity, convenience and price. It's no longer expensive to buy a smartphone. Console gaming is the least popular not because it's not interesting, but because it's very expensive.

This is consistent with Osborn (2016) who writes that gamers in Southeast Asia prefer to play on PCs because they provide an optimum experience, even though mobile offers a more convenient option. The majority of gamers in the current study were found to prefer to play their choice of mobile game on a PC screen for an enhanced experience.

PCs and mobiles were found to be the dominant form for our participants, with gamers alternating between the two, or even combining their modes of play. Several participants talked about this in their interviews. For example, one of the gamers (Participant #13) talked about the convenience of his mobile and the enhanced experience on the PC platform: 'I love playing martial arts games on mobile as it's convenient. But when I have time, I obviously choose to play on PC because the experience is interesting'. Participant #9 adds:

> I think PC and Mobile are the two most popular. However, the experience on each type is different, so it's hard to compare. We sit at one place to play games on PC but it's quite convenient to play games on mobile. However, the experience playing games on mobile is definitely not as interesting as playing on PC.

The cross-border cultural flow of gaming between Asian nations indicates the importance of globalisation (Yoon & Cheon, 2014) with the Vietnamese market been dominated by Chinese games to date (Brown, 2013). Cultural proximity is one of the key drivers for the selection of international games (Yoon & Cheon, 2014) and this may be the main reason for the popularity of Korean games in China (Chan, 2006). . The *Korean Wave* as it has come to be termed (Hjorth & Chan, 2009), has become ubiquitous in Vietnam as evidenced by the popularity of its music, films and TV programmes (Thomas, 2002). In gaming terms, however, it is Chinese imports that have traditionally dominated.

Our findings indicate that this is shifting as gaming becomes a more globalised commodity, where Western games such as *Dota, League of Legends* and *FIFA* were constantly mentioned by the participant's as capturing the Vietnamese gamer's imagination. The influence of Facebook (social media) has also potentially contributed to this shift, functioning as a central part of Vietnamese gamers' digital life. Participant #10, employed in the customer service department of a gaming publishing company said:

> Facebook is really important to connect game and gamers. Game publishers use Facebook to update news and support customers. Forums and blogs are no longer popular because when you want to post something, it takes time for admin to go through. On Facebook, it's really easy to post something.

These findings constitute our first major theme of glocalisation. 'The word *glocal* is a neologism; that is, it is a new word constructed by fusing global and local' (Roudometof, 2016, p. 1). The term originated in the Japanese business lexicon in the 1980s and while globalisation refers to the homogenising effects of international influence on culture, glocalisation refers to its heterogenising aspects (Robertson, 1994). Digital games represent a global media culture that fuses with aspects of national culture (Consalvo, 2006). Glocalisation points to the ways in which local cultures and global forces are mutually constitutive, creating hybridised cultures and practices (Robertson, 1995). The emergent Vietnamese gaming culture is influenced by global forces, however, those in the industry and the gamers themselves interpret and practice these through the prism of Vietnamese culture.

Cultural Competitiveness

The second theme to emerge was that of the competitive nature of the Vietnamese gamer. While competition remains an inherent characteristic of gaming globally, we observed that this competitiveness is driven by the local environment and influences. Vierra and Vierra (2010, p. 115) identified a level of Vietnamese competitiveness to the extent that winning is more important than the prize and 'a more pervasive and competitive norm than what is seen in westernized societies'. One of the participants, an operations manager working for a game studio, offered an astute observation for this reflecting the countries stage of economic development.

> I think normally gamers are competitive and combative when they are playing games. But maybe the level of competition in Vietnam is a bit higher, due to education and real-life society. People are so competitive to win in games to compensate their failures in real life. Let's think of Maslow hierarchy. When people have good accommodation, house and job, they want to have friends and open networks and relationships. But in Vietnam, we haven't still reached that level, thus it's easy to explain people's behaviors. (P# 16)

A game artist (P#4) articulated this difference between Western and Vietnamese gamers:

> In the West, people play game to experience, entertain and relax. Here in Asia, people put themselves so much on the game characters. Thus, they are very competitive and combative. They always want to win. The passion to win is really strong.

One interpretation for such behaviours based on these responses would indicate that gaming functions as a *compensatory* or *spillover* mechanism from life in general into the realm of leisure. The concept of compensatory leisure is based on the contention that work and other life situations are deficient and so the individual will 'compensate for these deficiencies in their choices of leisure and family activities' (Staines, 1980, p. 111). This can be extended to *self-discrepancy*, where a person experiences a sense of incongruity from how they perceive themselves to be and how they would like to be (Mandel, Rucker, Levav, & Galinsky, 2017). Some individuals who feel they are failing or have not achieved in life in ways they would like, may then choose leisure activities that enable them to experience a greater sense of competence.

These competitive behaviours can also be explained through the influence of early Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) from China to Vietnam as these create a combative environment between players (Smyth, 2007). There is a relationship between gameplay behaviours and specific cultural games (Chen, 2013) as the following participant quote attests: 'The gaming society has been built from console game and MMO (Multiplayer online games), thus Vietnamese play games so competitively that they always want to show their victory and defeat in-game enemies'. (P#22)

Vietnam's mobile gaming culture has also fuelled this competitive streak. A director of a game studio elaborated:

> Now with the mobile games, the fact that with Facebook, we can know who is playing what, who is stronger at which game. It creates an environment where you can compete with people very easily. You don't need to play at the same time but two weeks after your friends and you can compare your score with them. The environment created by mobile game is really made for competition and comparison. Comparison creates competition. (P#15)

In many cases, the need to be competitive is likely to motivate cheating and other forms of corruption. However, one of the participants identified that competitive sharing is a good thing.

> Casual games in Vietnam are very social. It's a way to discuss between people basically. Most of the game has Facebook access so everyone can see each other's best score. Everyone can see who is playing what. And it's kind of a social thing in that people beat each other.
>
> I think it is a social thing – a positive thing. (P#14)

Several of the participant's cited bad language and aggression as a characteristic of Vietnamese gamers yet our participants from an international background felt it was on par with other

countries; the Vietnamese gamer being no better or worse than online gamers from other countries. These initial comments by our Vietnamese participants may reflect what Murray (2016) identifies as an emphasis on creating and maintaining social harmony in line with traditional Confucian values. Nevertheless, the perceived anonymity of the online space may engender a minority of gamers to ignore these social norms. Combined with the strong Vietnamese values of nationalism and patriotism (Nguyen, 2016), our participants resented this poor representation of Vietnam.

Chen and Jeremy (2018) defined cheating in games as performing unacceptable actions to gain an unfair competitive advantage. The freemium model of gaming is where players make purchases for free to play games to improve their gameplay abilities. While our participants did not identify more traditional cheating such as hacking a game's programming code or exploiting the game mechanics unfairly, they did identify utilising resources to create advantages for the player as an unethical behaviour, which they labelled *pay to win*. The resentment associated with the pay to win method was frequently voiced by the participants as unfair for those who have developed a hard-won high level of gameplay skill, but can't afford pay to win. Nevertheless, the participants also acknowledged this as the price you pay for free access to games. 'A lot of Vietnamese gamers use the pay to win method, thus in a sense, publishers can generate high levels of revenue from this for their later investment.' (P #8). This phenomenon has parallels in China where inequality of social class in the offline society, is reflected in the online world of games (Chew, 2015), as the 'pay to win' approach has reduced trust and social cohesion among players (Chen, Shen, & Huang, 2016). Despite this issue, social interaction was found to be an important aspect of Vietnamese gaming culture, which we will now turn to.

Socialised Gaming Practices

The social nature of Vietnamese gaming was another key theme to emerge from the interviews with a series of practices and situations relevant to the Vietnamese culture and economic development status. Again, we see a form of glocalisation influencing these socialised practices as they represent a combination of international/global practices with local cultural influence. To illustrate, one of the participants informed us that online gaming has created a safe space for some where they can speak openly on any topic, a right that most Western citizens living in liberal democratic countries take for granted.

> Vietnamese gaming culture has created a unique community in which gamers are free to discuss what they want. When joining the game community, gamers have no barriers in communicating and exchanging ideas. They are very straight-forward in communication in contrast with other areas where people are afraid to raise their voice. (P#16)

While widespread access to the internet is relatively new to Vietnam, it is has had a significant impact upon Vietnamese society by providing its citizens a platform to engage in political discourse (Bui, 2016) and to express viewpoints alternative to those espoused by the countries state-controlled media outlets (Nguyen, 2014). The government in Vietnam has responded at times by blocking access to social media such as Facebook, or more dramatically punishing those with lengthy prison sentences for expressing views considered to be 'defaming Vietnam's communist regime' (Murray, 2017, n.p.). Vietnam's autocratic government and Confucian traditions has led to the development of strong social norms where there is low tolerance for deviant behaviours. As a result, the subcultural aspects of gaming provide a space for the Vietnamese to express themselves online in a way that is not always possible in the offline world.

Many Chinese players see games as a third place, one that transcends the work and home space, where they can socialise with friends in more open and expressive ways (Chen et al., 2016). The situation is similar in Vietnam where the growing popularity of eSport and the continued success of cyber cafes reflect the growing role of gaming as a third place for Vietnamese gamers. Leisure spaces alone do not

facilitate community (Yuen & Johnson, 2017), however, in the case of cyber cafes we see a hybrid offline online third place that offers a sense of community through the shared practice of gaming.

eSport's popularity has continued the normalisation of gaming in a culture where one third of the population play. eSport enthusiasts in Vietnam reached 2.8 million players, which is 5.2% of the online population (Pannekeet, 2016). As one participant put it: 'In the past, going to a cyber cafe was considered bad, but now society has a more open mind. They think games are like sport'. (P#13). Standards continue to improve as observed by participant #9:

> Compared with international players, the gameplay skill in Vietnam is actually not bad, especially in LOL, Dota and FIFA. Vietnam also has eSport teams that won in the Asian game competition; eSport here is really developed. The integration with global is quite fast. (P#9)

Despite Vietnam been viewed as a collectivist country, the results from this study indicate that there previously existed a lack of interest and motivation in teamwork. Competitive and cooperative gaming behaviours are distinct dimensions of the social aspects of play (Wilhelm, 2018) and the cooperative aspect of gaming in Vietnam is still evolving for the average gamer.

> Vietnamese gamers tend to be so personal in games and don't like teamwork which is so different from the foreigners. This is understandable because in real life, Vietnamese don't have good skills in working as a team. (P#6)

Leadership, effective teamwork skills and cooperative communication have been identified as some of the key skills needing improvement within the Vietnamese business arena (Tran, 2013; Vierra & Vierra, 2010; Vo & Hannif, 2013), and perhaps these cultural aspects extended to gaming. However, one of the participants noted: 'the most popular games are those that require team community in which gamers can create a team to compete with each other. For example, League of Legends is one of the most popular games because it enhances communication and strategies'. (P#18). League of Legends is one of the most popular eSport games in Vietnam; 15% of the country's population are fans due to its exposure on Facebook (Hanson, 2016). The continued spread of eSport has also led, according to one participant, to a 'gaming culture (that) is changing a bit, more cooperative and team-work, less unethical behaviours, especially in eSport because people are more influenced by the global gaming culture' (P#11). Another participant identified the continued development of the country as being in line with the development of eSport. 'I think eSport in Vietnam will be developed because the Vietnamese economy is developing. People's income is increasing, so they have more opportunities to approach technology than before. In addition, there are more and more innovative technology coming to Vietnam'. (P#25)

As these advances in technology, and subsequent exposure to the global community, continue to be adopted in Vietnam, change will continue to occur in the gaming community. This is common despite the collective culture of Southeast Asian nations, online consumers are influenced by global trends that subsequently impact on their online activities such as watching videos and playing games online (Chung, 2015). These again reinforce the glocalised nature of Vietnamese gaming culture

eSports in Vietnam are typically played in cyber cafes where for a low-price, gamers can access technology they might not be able to personally afford. We visited three cybercafes in Ho Chi Minh City in the course of our field work. Two of these were located in lower socio-economic parts of the city. In these two establishments, prices ranged from 6,000 to 8000 VND an hour (approximately 0.30USD) with PCs very tightly packed together. Despite a physical proximity that many Westerners would feel uncomfortable with, we observed a vibrant gaming scene where mostly young male gamers interacted with their neighbours at will and observed each other's play. Our discussions with the staff and owners informed us that cyber cafes in Vietnam tend towards a stereotypical demographic of predominantly younger males with females representing between 5–20 percent of customers depending on the cafe. Social interactions are common with players arriving in groups to play as teams. During weekends the cafes are generally at capacity. The social aspects of the Vietnamese cyber cafes were a common refrain. One Canadian gamer (P#24), fluent

in Vietnamese, stated that he wouldn't play at cafes in Canada (preferring to play at home), but the appeal of Vietnamese cafes lay in their social nature, which doesn't exist to the same extent in Canada.

We also talked to a representative (P#20) of CyberCore, a company that outfits and franchises cyber cafes throughout Vietnam. He told us that cyber cafes are continuing to grow both in number and in the level of technology used. His prediction was that:

> In the future, cyber cafés will be much more developed because now, eSport will be officially played in Sea (South East Asian) Games and the Olympics. Therefore, cyber cafés will be a place for teams to have training and practice.

Calleja (2010) identifies the most distinct escapist aspect of games is their ability to provide a variety of designed experiences. He argues that we should not reduce the escapist aspect of games as necessarily a motivation to want to escape one's own reality, instead games and gaming venues such as cyber cafes provide respite from the stressors of day-to-day life and opportunities for re-creation. Cyber cafes allow low cost leisure, entertainment and escape from the confines and constraints of the family environment where there are few freedoms for young people and tradition is still highly valued (Bélanger & Barbieri, 2009). One participant (a cyber cafe employee) told us that: 'People come here because they don't have computers at home and also with so many people at home it's not really comfortable to play'. Similarly, the CEO of a game's studio told us:

> People stay after work to play games. When we ask why they don't play at home, they said at home they need to take care of 4–6 siblings. So here this is a place to stay and feel a peaceful environment because of a condensed family environment. They also say that they like to stay here to play games because it makes them feel better than home. (P#15)

Korean PC Bangs represented online gaming and the association with offline socialising yet were increasingly under threat from gaming from home (Huhh, 2008), to the extent that they have almost halved in number over the last ten years (Jin, 2015). In contrast, the Vietnamese cyber cafe is only gathering pace with the emergence of team eSport proving increasingly popular. Unlike Korea, where cyber cafe culture peaked before the advent of Twitch and the global appeal of eSport, Vietnam's cyber cafe culture is growing in tandem with these events and the continued growth of digital gaming in the country.

Conclusion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the impact of digital gaming as leisure in Vietnam, and vice versa the impact of Vietnam on the culture of digital gaming. Vietnam, like other parts of the world, feature gaming practices that are embedded within its cultural and geographical context (Beltagui & Schmidt, 2017). Global gaming culture is not a monoculture, instead it is shaped by a range of contextual factors; historical, economic, political, institutional, geographic and psychological. The glocalisation of gaming in Vietnam represents external regional influences (East Asia) and those further afield (Europe and North America) that are interpreted through the prism of Vietnam's unique socio-cultural traditions. The glocalisation of gaming in Vietnam represents an ephemeral state that is subject to constant shifts in technology, society and economy. Digital games are a key vantage point from which to observe and approach ongoing transformations in society itself (Muriel & Crawford, 2018), and gaming in Vietnam can be seen as reflecting the host of influences shaping this rapidly modernising nation.

Aspects of glocalisation can also be seen in the subsequent themes where it was found that Vietnamese gamers are particularly competitive. This is certainly not unique, but in this case is formed by a combination of cultural history and values that continue to be shaped by emerging economic disparities and guided by emergent global practices. Findings such as this may seem at odds with Vietnam which is often described as a collectivist culture, however, collectivism in

Vietnam is more often a feature of the extended family than it is in contexts outside the home (Bélanger & Barbieri, 2009).

Gelfand et al.'s (2011) loose and tight cultures provides a useful theoretical model in which to interpret cross-cultural leisure activities. Vietnam is a tight culture with less tolerance for deviant behaviour. In contrast, 'loose' cultures are characterised by greater tolerance for behaviours that deviate from accepted social norms. Our findings indicate that for many Vietnamese, gaming allows an escape from the tight cultural pressures, expectations and social norms of day-to-day life in Vietnam (Uz, 2015). Young Vietnamese use cyber cafés as a temporary escape from the confinement of familial and educational expectations. This can be viewed as assuming a global practice to eschew traditional cultural practices and roles. Digital gaming, like many other leisure activities, reflect wider societal processes. However, they also have the potential to shape and transform these very societal processes in return as they function as a conduit for global culture that represents new values, attitudes and beliefs (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). This raises a number of important questions. For example, are gaming sessions among friends at cyber cafes encouraging individuals to move further away from traditional Vietnamese culture? As the internet has seen an initial wave of public political discourse in Vietnam (Bui, 2016), is the perception of online games as a safe space for personal expression providing a further platform for societal impact?

It is important that activities such as gaming are better understood as they provide many millions of Vietnamese with the opportunity for a range of enjoyable leisure experiences. This study has provided an initial understanding of gaming in Vietnam and the continually evolving and growing role of leisure to reproduce culture and to function as a basis for producing new forms of culture. It serves to underline how we can use the study of leisure for the understanding of embodiment, power relations, social inequalities, social structures and social institutions. It also reinforces Shaw's (2010) contention that studies on game culture should not make assumptions regarding the ways in which certain types of games, modes of play and types of players are used to validate traditional gaming research.

The current study is limited by its exploratory nature and its focus on HCMC; its purpose was to provide an initial foray into digital gaming in Vietnam's most populous city, where it has become an increasingly popular leisure activity. The study mapped out some of the basic elements of gaming in relation to the *Vietnamese way* of engaging with this leisure activity and how culture can influence leisure and vice versa. As such, it provides a foundation for future research on gaming in Vietnam seeking to understand more specific aspects of the phenomenon. It is recommended that future studies focus on the diversity of participants that enjoy games in Vietnam, including gender, class, education and ethnicity, as well as those living in other geographical areas of the country, in particular regional and rural provinces. Also, what effect does social and economic inequality have on gaming? Another important and emerging aspect of gaming is eSports, which continue to grow in popularity both globally and within Vietnam. The nature of eSports would suggest that it is a form of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007) and as such would benefit from a more focused study on it. As Vietnam's gaming ecosystem is only beginning to catch up with more developed countries, the current period represents an important opportunity for scholars to observe emergent leisure activities at an embryonic stage through the lens of a distinct cultural heritage.

Disclosure statement

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